

# *Alaska* BEYOND >>

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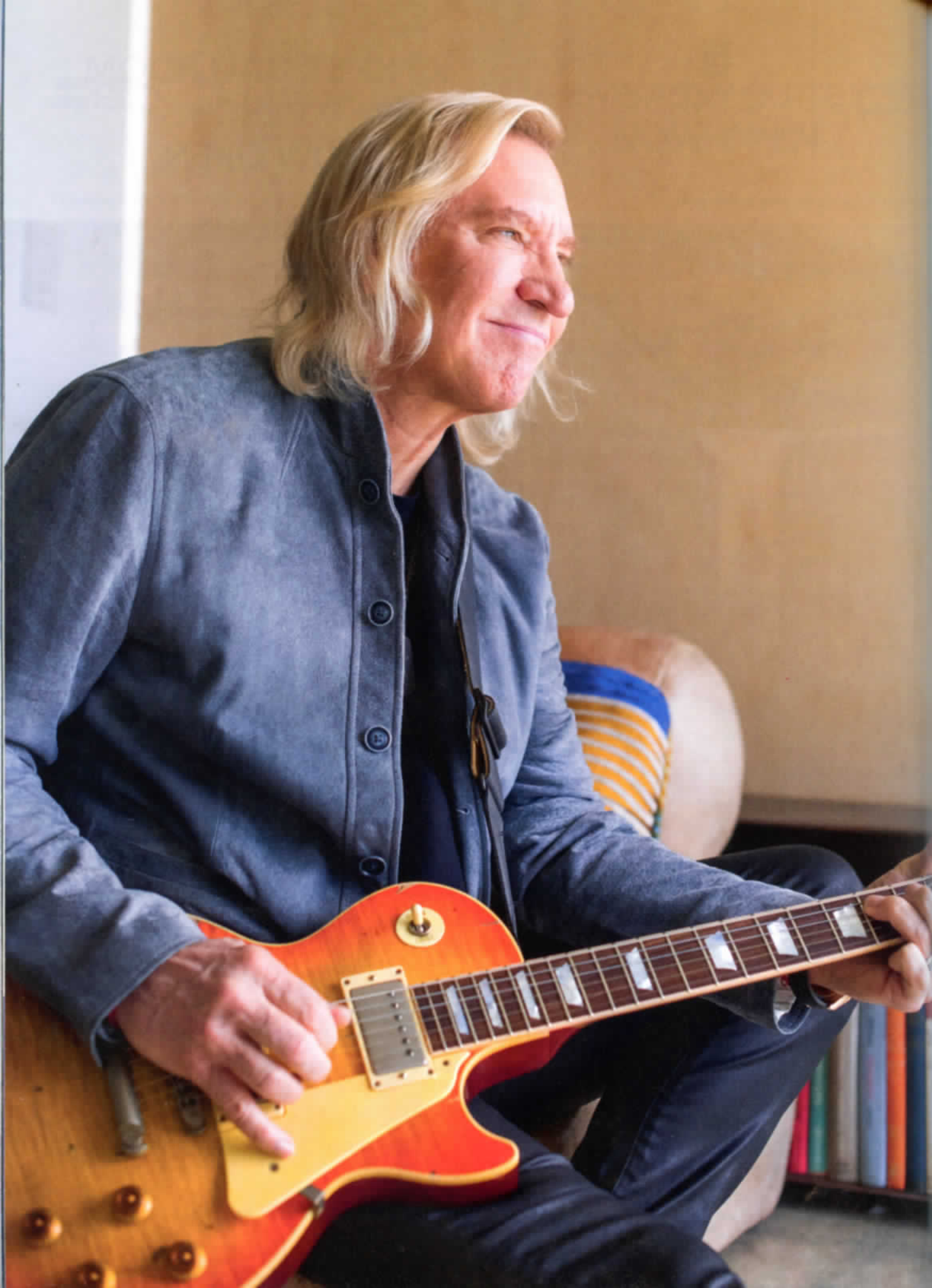
## HONORING SERVICE

ALASKA EMPLOYEES AND JOE WALSH  
GIVE AID TO VETERANS CAUSES

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## ROCKER JOE WALSH PARTNERS WITH ALASKA AND ITS EMPLOYEES IN SUPPORT OF VETERANS

BY ERIC LUCAS

# HONORING SERVICE

**One day a superstar carrying a guitar walked into a hospital.**

It wasn't just any hospital, nor was it just any run-of-the-mill rock star. Joe Walsh is a Rock & Roll Hall of Famer, and a member of one of the biggest American bands of all time, the Eagles. And a few years ago he was visiting Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, the leading health-care institution for military service members and their families in the United States.

After stopping for personal chats with intensive-care patients resting after surgery, Walsh headed into the Prosthetic Orthotic Service section, where a couple dozen young men and women—soldiers, sailors, flyers—were adjusting to artificial arms and legs; lifting weights; and learning to walk, write and conduct daily life.

"We send these guys away to fight in distant corners of the globe, and so many come back broken. But they were all very upbeat, ready to go on with life," Walsh recalls.

Naturally, song broke out. Walsh's initial plan was to provide guitar-playing tips to the veterans, including one young soldier who wanted to learn to finger chords with his new prosthetic hand. The

afternoon evolved into a sing-along, not that all the young men knew exactly who their visitor was. As Walsh launched into *Hotel California*, the Eagles song that stands above all others, one vet exclaimed, "My dad used to play that!"

*Hotel California*, one of rock's premier anthems, is an epic that stretches to nearly 7 minutes, still provokes debates about its meaning, and concludes with a famous two-guitar coda cooked up by Don Felder and Walsh that has been named by *Guitar World* magazine the No. 8 best guitar solo ever. The album it appeared on is the third-best-selling American LP of all time, at 26 million copies.

That album and song were recorded more than 40 years ago, in 1976.

Yet, at 70, Joe Walsh is as dynamic, present and relevant as ever. And in addition to touring with the Eagles and continuing solo work on the side, he has added a new page to his resume: supporter of American veterans and veterans groups.

As co-founder and star of VetsAid, an annual concert that raises funds for veterans-support agencies, Walsh is fulfilling a personal mission born in long-ago family tragedy and bolstered by friendships with figures as diverse as Willie

Nelson, Eric Clapton, brother-in-law Ringo Starr and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth. The first VetsAid event, held last fall in Fairfax, Virginia, raised more than \$360,000 for vets groups around the country. This year's concert, sponsored by Alaska Airlines, will take place at the Tacoma Dome, south of Seattle, on November 11, with Eagles co-founder Don Henley joining Walsh and James Taylor on stage (vetsaid.org). Proceeds from the concert will be distributed to a roster of national as well as local and regional veterans groups.

"No matter what you think of all the wars—like them or hate them—we all need to love the soldiers," Walsh declares. "I've been wanting to do something for a long time. Seeing as rock 'n' roll is what I do best, this is the least I can do for those who served and continue to serve our country."

Walsh dates his interest in supporting veterans and their families to a traumatic childhood event, his father's death. A flight instructor for the U.S. Air Force, Robert Newton Fidler died in a training crash on Okinawa in 1949, when Walsh was just 20 months old.

"That term 'flight instructor' back in those days really also meant 'test pilot.' It was the dawn of the jet age," Walsh says. "One day he didn't come back, and that was that. I never got to know my father."

While there are many national organizations supporting veterans, Walsh decided to direct some of the VetsAid proceeds to smaller groups that receive little notice or funding. Last year, concert earnings went to a retreat center for combat veterans, a support group for San Francisco-area veterans, two groups that help the children and families of fallen military members, a veterans horse-therapy program, and a transitional-housing program for veterans, among others.

"We started hearing about all these small groups, in small towns, that serve veterans but have almost no budget,"

*Joe Walsh with Alaska Airlines employees Tom Allen and Elisabeth Smith, who continue to serve with the U.S. Air Force.*

## SERVICE AND CAREER

Unlike many veterans, Tom Allen was well into adult life when he joined the military, signing up for the Air Force as a member of the Washington state Air National Guard at the age of 37. It was a move he had long thought about, as his father had also been an Air Force member. Coincidentally, the same year Allen joined the military, 2011, is the year he joined Alaska Airlines, where he is now Manager, Hangar Line Maintenance in Seattle—and one of the two Alaska Airlines employee vets pictured on this month's cover with rock star Joe Walsh.

Elisabeth Smith, the other Alaska Airlines veteran on the cover, is an LA-based First Officer whose military background is also in the Air Force. Smith began flying C-17 cargo planes at McChord Air Force Base, near Tacoma, in 1999; after many years as an aircraft commander on C-17s, she is now a reservist at March Air Reserve Base, marking 20 years in the U.S. Armed Forces. Smith began flying for Alaska in 2005.

Both Smith and Allen credit their military back-

ground for boosting their aviation careers. Allen was hired by Alaska after attending a Hiring Our Heroes event in Tacoma, where the airline's recruiters took note of his college degree in aviation technologies and his Airframe & Powerplant certifications.

Smith says her background was instrumental in her transition to commercial aviation. "My extensive flight training and experience with the Air Force have made me a better pilot for Alaska Airlines," she says. "Managing military duty, family life and a career at Alaska Airlines can be challenging, but also extremely fulfilling."

For his part, Allen says the relationship between veterans and companies such as Alaska Airlines is mutually beneficial. As a member of the airline's Fallen Soldier program and its Military Employee Resource Group, as well as the Camo2Commerce transition-assistance group at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Allen takes great pride in his work and his ability to help other veterans and their families.

"One of the best ways we can help our veterans as a community and a company is to recognize the incredible training and skill that they possess," Allen observes. "Recognizing the special skills of the military member and finding locations within the Alaska Airlines family, like I was able to do, makes us a much better place."

The airline values the two-way benefits that flow from employing veterans.

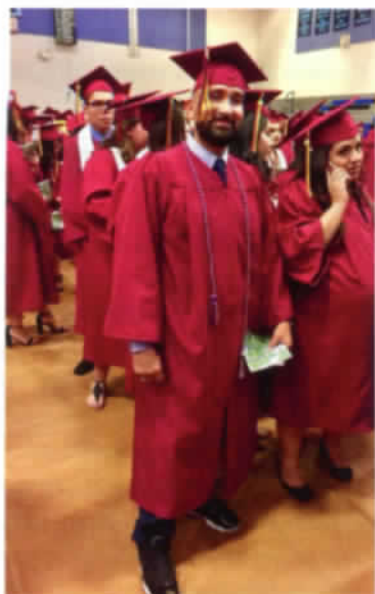
"A military background is a great fit for us," says Megan Gimmedstad, recruiting outreach manager. "Just like an airline, the military has an operational focus, and we seek veterans because they bring that to our operations."

Both Allen and Smith expressed their appreciation for the work Joe Walsh is doing to benefit veterans groups. "You cannot spend any time talking to Joe without realizing how much he loves the military and each and every veteran," Allen says.

Veterans interested in working for Alaska Airlines are invited to visit careers.alaskaair.com. —E.L.







Groups benefiting from the support of VetsAid include (clockwise from right): Warrior Herd's summer camp for Gold Star kids; Equinox Ranch and Team Rubicon; the Run for the Fallen's Hearts of Our Heroes Camp for Gold Star kids; and the Right Turn for Yuma Veterans program.



Walsh explains. "Suppose you're a group of veterans in Arkansas who want to sponsor a race to bring vets together and call attention to their circumstances. Where do you find the money for T-shirts and permits?" VetsAid provided a grant to the Arkansas Run for the Fallen last year.

"We send these men and women away to fight our wars, and a lot of them come back needing help they cannot find. That's just not right," says Walsh, whose social consciousness was developed in the Vietnam War era. "Somebody should do something. That's what we decided."

Walsh realizes "doing something" is easier when you're a celebrity—in fact, he enjoys the chance to leverage his status. "When somebody tells me something I wrote or sang helped them—that's the best reward."

**Rock star** is a term carrying so much linguistic impact, it has become a broad-band description: You might pick up a magazine and find someone labeled a "rock star chef." But Walsh is a true, five-star, longtime rock 'n' roll superstar, having been atop the charts for almost a half-century. He's performed with legends

## ★ JOE WALSH & FRIENDS PRESENT VETSAID 2018

This year's VetsAid benefit concert takes place on Sunday, November 11, at the Tacoma Dome, south of Seattle. Founder Joe Walsh will be joined on stage by Don Henley of the Eagles, as well as singer/songwriters James Taylor and Chris Stapleton, and sister band Haim. Tickets start at \$25, and donations to VetsAid can be made at [VetsAid.org](http://VetsAid.org). Sponsors include Alaska Airlines and Boeing.

Following is a list of some of the 2018 grant recipients for VetsAid.

■ **Operation Mend** provides advanced medical treatment, as well as comprehensive psychological health support—at no cost—for post-9/11-era service members, veterans and their families.

■ **Hire Heroes USA** empowers U.S. military members, veterans and military spouses to succeed in the civilian workforce.

■ **Warrior Canine Connection** enlists recovering warriors in a therapeutic mission of learning to train service dogs for fellow vets.

■ **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (T.A.P.S.)** offers compassionate care to those grieving the loss of a loved one who died while serving or as a result of service.

■ **Semper Fi Fund** provides resources and support for post-9/11 combat wounded, critically ill and catastrophically injured members of the U.S. Armed Forces and their families.

■ **Children of Fallen Patriots Foundation** awards

college scholarships and educational counseling to military children who lost a parent in the line of duty.

■ **Stop Soldier Suicide** works one-on-one with troops, veterans and military family members to help navigate the maze of services, programs and assistance available.

■ **Midwest Shelter for Homeless Veterans** provides housing, supportive services and community outreach to help homeless and at-risk veterans and their families achieve self-sufficiency.

■ **Sentinels of Freedom Scholarship Foundation** helps injured and severely wounded post-9/11 veterans become productive and self-sufficient members of their civilian communities.



# U.S. VETERANS

## 18.6 MILLION

Total military veterans.

## 4.0 MILLION

Veterans with a service-connected disability.

## 6.1 MILLION

Largest veteran cohort: Vietnam-era.

## 40,000

Homeless veterans.

## 8.6 PERCENT

1.6 million veterans are women.

## 9.2 PERCENT

Highest percentage of local population being veterans: Alaska.

Sources: National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

ranging from Bruce Springsteen and Paul McCartney to Dave Grohl and Zac Brown. His Gallic-centurion looks and still-flowing blond locks fit the role to a T. His clean, evocative guitar-playing style is often praised by other guitar stars.

He seems happily bemused by the whole thing.

"You know, that glorious life you see when we're up on stage for 2.5 hours, it's not real," he observes. "The rest of the day, the other 21.5 hours, we go home and lead normal lives like everyone else—walking the dog, going to the grocery store, filling the car with gas." He thinks a minute, grins. "Loading the dishwasher."

Meeting with me in a roomy suite at the W Los Angeles-West Beverly Hills, Walsh has requested fruit, a plate of cookies and a pitcher of iced tea. His wife, Marjorie Bach, has refined the request to

"healthy" cookies. His "entourage" for the interview is his stepson Christian Q, also a VetsAid co-founder; neither father nor son draws compensation from the group. Tennis shoes and athletic slacks are the attire for both.

Not much rock star octane? Walsh disdains the whole notion: He actually wrote one of his most famous solo songs, *Rocky Mountain Way*, while mowing the lawn in his backyard in Colorado. He is a self-described "ordinary, average guy" (he titled one solo album just that), born in Kansas, raised in New Jersey and educated in Ohio. "My friends are all boring/ And so am I," declare the lyrics from the album's title track.

Yet his personal backstory includes many not-so-boring escapades. He was a rock star at a young age as lead guitarist for Ohio rock band James Gang (remem-



Joe Walsh performing with the Eagles, 1979.

## ★ JOE WALSH

**LIFETIME AIR MILES:** "Probably to Mars and back."

**FAVORITE ARTISTS:** Ray Charles, B.B. King.

**FAVORITE MUSIC:** Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*.

**FAVORITE SONG:** *One Day at a Time*.

**MEANING OF LIFE:** "Do something that makes a difference." —E.L.

ber *Funk #49?*). On tour in Europe with The Who, he became buddies with drummer Keith Moon, whose exploits are notorious. Back in the States, Walsh

became a compadre of comedian John Belushi—Walsh has a cameo as the prison inmate who starts a riot in *The Blues Brothers*. One time, at a Benihana restaurant, Walsh says, Belushi decided to grab the knives and take over chef duties. "That was messy," he recalls, wryly.

Walsh is co-writer of a famous ode to high living, *Life in the Fast Lane*. And he's the author of one of rock's most famous lyrics: "My Maserati does 185," a deceptively simple, deadpan piece of irony

from *Life's Been Good* that all by itself can turn up more than a million hits on a Google search.

Walsh in fact had—and still has—a Maserati. "I don't drive 185, though."

The song is actually a sendup of the rock star lifestyle, and in 1994 Walsh hung up his high-life spurs. He got clean and sober, and in October, he and Marjorie received a humanitarian award from Facing Addiction with NCADD (National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence) for decades of work supporting addiction recovery. He credits recovery support groups for his sober life, along with simple good fortune.

"So many of my friends died before they hit bottom," he says. "I just happened to hit bottom before I died."

It was hard to return to the rock 'n' roll business without vodka and cocaine,



Walsh recalls.

The Eagles are currently touring the country and Walsh is enjoying it. "Playing in front of all those people clean and sober, it wasn't comfortable at first. But I'm having fun now. And I'm happy to be an example of a sober rock star."

The fellowship model for dealing with personal trauma is something Walsh believes can transfer easily from addiction recovery to veterans support.

"When I walk in a room to spend time with a bunch of people who are just like me, then I'm in a club where I belong, and that's the beginning of healing. Wouldn't it be great if every veteran in the country had just such a group?"

"If you're alone, you isolate. That empowers your mind to focus on the negative. But when you're together, you get out of the negative. There are all these little

pockets of help for veterans, like some nonprofit softball league that brings vets together twice a week in some small farm town in the Midwest," Walsh says. "That's who we want to help. We can give them a grant to buy bats and balls, you know?"

This year's concert at the Tacoma Dome promises to be a much bigger event than last year's—with a capacity of 23,000, the dome is one of the biggest music venues in the United States that is not actually a sports-specific stadium. And Walsh promises that it will be far



*Joe Walsh on stage at VetsAid 2017.*

more than just a gathering of rock fans.

"We're not 20,000 strangers in an arena. We're all friends who just haven't met before." ✕

*Eric Lucas writes from his home in Washington's San Juan Islands.*